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SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM: END OF YEAR WRAP-UP

REF: A. KIGALI 480

[B](#). KIGALI 790

[C](#). KIGALI 842

[D](#). KIGALI 595

[1](#)1. Issues of press freedom in 2006 remained the subject of much debate and action in Rwanda. A year which began with public criticism of Rwanda's media by President Kagame and of individual reporters by other officials later saw clear signs that senior GOR officials recognize the importance of a free, effective press to the development of Rwanda's democracy and to international perceptions of the country. The year concludes with evidence of a slow maturing of the media and of its relations with the GOR. In spite of some reports of harassment, occasional run-ins with the police and other government authorities, and an alleged physical attack on one journalist during the year, 10 members of Rwanda's private media were, during a recent Embassy organized roundtable, unanimous in declaring that the press in Rwanda is considerably freer than it was even two or three years ago. Major complaints focused on economic obstacles to making journalism profitable, rather than charges of government control.

The Scorecard

[1](#)2. In 2006 no newspapers were seized, no new legal cases were initiated against Rwandan journalists, there were no reports of journalists being detained, and one journalist who began the year in prison--Umuko reporter Jean Leonard Rugambage--was released after his case was reviewed by senior officials. The number of independent Rwandan media outlets continued to grow: nine independent Rwandan radio stations are now on the air, and some 37 newspapers are now being published. During the year New Times became Rwanda's first daily paper. While the New Times and government newspapers continue to receive the lion's share of government advertising, several newspapers received advertisements from government bodies, including opposition papers such as Umuseso. Newspapers such as Focus, Umuseso, Rwanda Newslane, and Umuvugizi published articles critical of senior government officials and institutions and the Rwandan Patriotic Front without being sanctioned. Even pro-government New Times published allegations of fraud, waste, and abuse by government agencies and officials. Some of Rwanda's radio stations expanded their news programming during the year and also began to tackle more politically sensitive issues that previously were ignored. Local versions of "Crossfire" and "Hardtalk" on competing radio stations have been successful and, in some instances, influential. For example, Deputy Police Commissioner Mary Gahonzire agreed to review the Rwandan National Police's (RNP) decision to close bars weekdays at 10:00pm after the issue was raised during her appearance on Contact FM's Crossfire, and the Kigali city government's decision to ban

motorcycle taxis from city streets was rescinded in part because of heavy criticism of the decision on radio stations as well as in newspapers. Contact FM also recently has collaborated with a local NGO, Institute for Research and Dialogue for Peace, in broadcasting two-hour debates on the role of political parties in the country and population control.

¶3. Nonetheless, occasional reports of harassment and anti-press conspiracy theories persisted. The year's most serious incidents and allegations centered on two individuals: Umuko editor Bonaventure Bizumeremyi and VOA stringer Lucie Umukundwa, and one institution: Radio France International (RFI). As reported in Reftel B, Bizumeremyi ran afoul of the High Council of the Press (HCP) following publication in late July of issue 26 of the paper. The HCP concluded that multiple articles in issue 26 violated Rwanda's media law and demanded that Bizumeremyi publish an apology and corrections. The contents of at least one of the articles ultimately led the head of the Criminal Investigations Division of the RNP on August 3 to summons Bizumeremyi for questioning. Bizumeremyi responded by going into hiding, published an apology in another Kinyarwanda newspaper, and, sometime between August 11 and August 14, crossed into Uganda.

¶4. In a recent meeting with Emboff, Bizumeremyi confirmed that he returned to Rwanda in early November after completing two months of journalism training in Benin. Bizumeremyi stated that he considers the incident surrounding issue 26 closed, he was never charged with any offense, and he has not felt compelled to change his editorial line. Asked how and when he determined it was safe to return to Rwanda, Bizumeremyi replied that he knew it was safe after hearing an

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August 14 presidential press conference at which Kagame, responding to questions about alleged harassment of local journalists, ordered the State Minister for Internal Security to investigate the allegations and told law enforcement officials to leave the journalists alone.

¶5. As reported in Reftel C, August 14 also was the date of an alleged physical attack on Olivier Tibasumba, a part-time VOA employee whose sister, Lucie Umukundwa, was a VOA stringer and head of the VOA office in Kigali. According to Tibasumba, the unknown assailants threatened to harm his and Umukundwa's families unless they stopped interfering in their work. Immediately after the attack, Umukundwa and Tibasumba told Emboff they believed Umukundwa, who was publicly criticized for her reporting by a GOR official in January, was the real target of the threat. Subsequently Umukundwa reported receiving threatening phone calls and suspicious visits from unidentified individuals. Embassy officers had numerous contacts with high level GOR officials regarding Umukundwa's situation. Several of these officials offered to speak directly with Umukundwa and to follow up on any tangible information she could provide regarding the reported threats. Umukundwa declined to avail herself of the opportunity to speak directly to these officials.

¶6. Umukundwa eventually left Rwanda via Congo and made her way to Uganda. Umukundwa currently is studying journalism in France. Tibasumba continues to live in Rwanda without any further reports of harassment. Both the HCP and the RNP conducted investigations into the alleged attack. The RNP concluded that the allegation "seems to have been fabricated" based on the following factors: 1) Neither Tibasumba nor Umukundwa ever filed a police report on the matter, despite having been advised to; 2) Umukundwa refused to take or return calls from police investigators; 3) Tibasumba was unable to furnish names of any of the individuals who he said helped him from the crime scene to his home after he was beaten, the motorist who was with him before he was beaten, or the hospital where he reported being taken for treatment. The HCP expects to release its findings in the next week.

¶7. The deterioration of relations between Rwanda and France during the year had a direct impact on the operations of RFI in the country. Per Reftel D, the GOR decided in June not to renew the visa of RFI correspondent Sonia Rolley and gave her 48 hours to depart the country. While the GOR has never publicly stated the reason for its decision, the Information Ministry had recently renewed Rolley's press credential and indicated that they had found nothing objectionable in her reporting. According to the resident Agence France Presse reporter, RFI intended to replace Rolley at the beginning of ¶2007. On November 27, however, the last French officials departed Rwanda after the severing of diplomatic ties between the two countries. The GOR decided at the same time to cease the activities of all projects and institutions in Rwanda affiliated with the Government of France, including the French school, the Franco-Rwandan Cultural Center, assistance projects, and local operations and broadcast of RFI. The decision to suspend RFI operations in the country and to end transmission of RFI's signal is the direct result of the harsh break in relations between the countries and is not related to the content of RFI broadcasts.

¶8. While Umuseso, Umuvugizi, and Umuco made allegations during the course of the year of verbal harassment and of a conspiracy to shut these opposition papers down, at year's end all three papers are operating without interference and have not scaled back their criticism of the government.

Beyond the Scorecard

¶9. Rwanda's government and society remain very hierarchical and people quickly fall in lockstep with senior government officials, particularly President Kagame. This tendency was evident early in 2006 when Kagame's January 24 public criticism of the media for a lack of ethics and skills set the tone for similar statements by other senior Government officials (including in a public meeting where one BBC stringer and Umukundwa reportedly were accused of insufficient patriotism and biased reporting). Kagame subsequently stated that his comments were intended not to denigrate or threaten the journalism profession but to prod the journalists to improve their standards. Kagame has been increasingly accessible to the media since the early months of 2006. He has held regular, lengthy, and wide-ranging press conferences for local journalists, spent two hours fielding questions from panelists and the public on a live radio talk show (on an independent station), and chastised other government officials for not making themselves more

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accessible to journalists. Official criticism of the media has, of recent, been less accusatory and more focused on the need for improved professionalism and skills. One manifestation of this change in attitude is a renewed emphasis on providing training for journalists. Both the Information Ministry and the HCP have organized journalism workshops, and the HCP intends to open a unit dedicated specifically to the task of coordinating and organizing journalism training. Both the Information Ministry and the HCP have supported the establishment of a training center in Kigali for working journalists.

¶10. Shyaka Kanuma, chief editor of Focus newspaper and a former Nieman fellow at Harvard, who has referred to President Kagame in writing as a benevolent dictator and criticized Rwanda for a lack of political space, nonetheless credits Kagame with creating an environment in which the press is free to express itself. In a recent conversation with Emboffs, Kanuma expressed concern not about a lack of press freedom in Rwanda but about the fact that it is insufficiently grounded institutionally and depends too much on Kagame individually. In extensive conversations with Emboffs, no Rwandan journalist has asserted that press

freedom worsened over the course of the year. In fact, during a recent roundtable discussion, members of Rwanda's independent media were unanimous in their belief that there is greater press freedom in the country today than in previous years.

¶11. Rwanda's journalists themselves have shown signs of renewed vigor in recent months. Following an Embassy-sponsored workshop on media management, participants in the workshop led by the president of Rwanda's Press House drafted a joint statement calling on the Government to remove tariffs on printing supplies that make newspaper publication in Rwanda cost prohibitive for most outlets. Invited to provide comment on two pieces of legislation concerning the media sector currently before parliament, the Press House and Association of Rwandan Journalists have begun organizing sessions with their members in order to provide a thorough review of the bills. Most recently, the journalists took it upon themselves to review controversial articles which seemed to deny the genocide in Rwanda, written by Agnes Nkusi-Uwimana, owner and director of the Kinyarwanda-lanagauge bi-monthly, Umurabyo. An ad hoc committee of journalists selected by their peers criticized Nkusi-Uwimana for her lack of professionalism, for tarnishing the reputation of journalists in Rwanda, and for printing a revisionist article and called on her to publish an apology and corrections in the paper's next issue. This first step toward self-regulation demonstrated greater initiative on the part of the journalists and an increased awareness of how they can work to build the trust of the government and ostensibly independent institutions such as the HCP (Note: this case will be reported in greater detail septel).

Looking Ahead

¶12. The many obstacles to further development of Rwanda's press outlined in Reftel A remain. These include financial, technical, and human resource limitations, poor legislation, and weak institutions. There are, however, two areas where significant progress can be achieved in the coming year. When parliament returns from recess in late January it will take up draft bills to revise the current media law and to replace the presidential statute that governs the HCP. As currently written, post believes that the bills do little to address the concerns expressed by many international observers with respect to press freedom issues. Parliament has, however, invited public comment on the bills and, as noted above, journalists will have an opportunity to present their views. Parliament also has accepted the Embassy's offer to fund an independent analysis of the bills by a media law expert. Properly drafted, these two bills could create the legal foundation necessary to expand press freedom in the country.

¶13. USAID also is in the final stages of discussions to provide first year operating costs for the Great Lakes Media Center, a new institution established primarily for the purpose of providing training for Rwanda's working journalists. Led by American photojournalist Sally Stapleton, the Center enjoys the support of local journalists and government officials alike. All parties hope that the Center will, in the long-term, address the skills shortage among Rwanda's journalists and contribute to the development of a more professional and effective press.

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